

**Richard W. Cull, Richard H. Ffrench, Mario T. Noto and Robert E.
Schoenenberger Oral History Interview—12/17/1970**
Administrative Information

Creators: Richard W. Cull, Richard H. Ffrench, Mario T. Noto, and Robert E. Schoenenberger

Interviewer: James A. Oesterle

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Location: Washington D.C.

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Biographical Note

This is an interview with Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials about the 1962 Cuban prisoners' exchange. The four interviewees planned and executed the prisoners' US homecoming, and include Cull, who was Chief of the Press Information Office (1962-1975); Ffrench, who was Deputy Assistant Commissioner of Inspections; Noto, who was Associate Commissioner for Operations; and Schoenenberger, who was Associate Deputy Regional Commissioner for Operations (1959-1964). They discuss why the INS was tasked with planning the prisoners' homecoming along with the actual planning, preparations, and concerns over the prisoners' homecoming, among other issues.

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Richard Cull Jr.
Richard Cull Jr.
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Richard H. Ffrench
Richard H. Ffrench

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May 9, 1973
Date

F. J. D.

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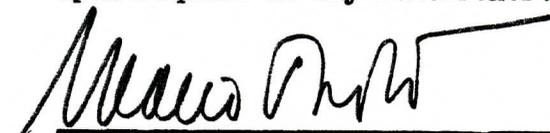
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Mario T. Noto
9/30/72

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Robert E. Schoenenberger
Robert E. Schoenenberger

4/27/73
Date

James B. Rhoads
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May 9, 1973
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Oral History Interview

with

Richard W. Cull
Richard H. Ffrench
Mario T. Noto
Robert E. Schoenenberger

December 17, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By James A. Oesterle

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program
of the John F. Kennedy Library

CULL: This is Dick Cull. I'm the public information officer of the U.S. Immigration Service [Immigration and Naturalization Service]. I've been the public information officer for the Immigration Service since early 1962. Before that I had been a newspaper correspondent here for fifteen years with the Dayton, Ohio news [*Dayton Daily News*] and then the chief of bureau of the Washington bureau of the Cox Newspapers in Ohio, Georgia, and Florida. I came into government as a press information officer in the Kennedy Administration [John F. Kennedy] in May of '62. It was soon after that that the planning began for the return of the Bay of Pigs prisoners who had been in jail in Cuba since, I think, early maybe spring of 1961. I was given the assignment of handling the press, radio, T.V. coverage of the return of the prisoners. I was given this assignment in, as I say, early '62, sometime after May.

The planning began sometime, I would guess, around September. I recall that in October of '62 there was the intention then of bringing the prisoners back to Homestead Air Force Base, a big S.A.C. [Strategic Air Command] base south of Miami, from their prisons in Cuba. There had been intensive planning, but the planning had run into difficulties. And then, of course, the Cuban Missile Crisis came along and all thought of bringing the

prisoners, some 1,300 of them, out in October was given up. So we came back to Washington and the planning

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continued. And finally, just before Christmas of '62, the entire project was carried out at Homestead Air Force Base in Florida and carried out successfully.

Now here is Mr. Mario T. Noto, who at that time was the chief of operations for the Immigration Service and who was the overall coordinator for the whole project. I'm sure he can explain the history of the project to you.

NOTO: Well, my name is Mario T. Noto and at this time, in this time frame, I was the Associate Commissioner for operations of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. I was born in New York City in 1917. In 1942, I joined the service in New York as a United States naturalization examiner. There was the interruption of World War II for a period of three years. I later came back into the service in 1945 and eventually went through the jobs of investigator, examiner, supervisor, and eventually got to the position of heading operations in 1962. I was appointed as associate commissioner for operations in February of 1962 by the then Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy.

My recollection, or at least my first recollection, of our personal involvement in the exchange of the Cuban Bay of Pigs prisoners goes back to the very early part of April 1962. I remember with some clarity that Commissioner Raymond F. Farrell, who had just been appointed commissioner that year and who still is the commissioner of the service today, called me into his office—I think that Mr. Cull may have been present there too—and informed me at that time that the Attorney General, Mr. Robert F. Kennedy, had told him together with Mr. Nicholas Katzenbach [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach], who was then the Deputy Attorney General, that the service would be given the responsibility of actually performing the exchange that is the receipt of the Cuban Bay of Pigs prisoners who would be released by Castro [Fidel Castro] from the Isle of Pines and who would be allowed to come to the United States. Commissioner Farrell said that this was an extremely important assignment to the service, not only because of its delicate nature, but because President John F. Kennedy had a sincere, dedicated personal interest in seeing to it that these prisoners would be received in the United States in not only an appropriate setting, but under very proper and fitting circumstances to compensate them for their ordeal, and to show them the democratic process of the United States. And especially that the then President and his Administration wanted to convey the message to these unfortunate individuals that this country wanted to alleviate their sufferings and

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accept them into the United States to give them freedom.

When Commissioner Farrell said that, I made arrangements to confer with Mr. Katzenbach. I recall going to the office of the then deputy attorney general, and Mr. Cull was with me, and sitting in Mr. Katzenbach's office was Lou Oberdorfer [Louis F. Oberdorfer]

who at that time was Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Tax Division. If I recall correctly, I think a John Nolan [John E. Nolan] was also at the meeting, who at that time was either administrative or executive assistant to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy. Mr. Katzenbach explained to us what the mission was, which briefly was to see to it that appropriate measures were set up to not only receive these prisoners but to convey to the world the message that we in America had not forgotten them and that we were determined to bring them back to freedom and liberty. Mr. Katzenbach then said to us that the military would be involved because the operation would be performed out of Homestead Air Force Base, which was, at that time, a live missile base located in an air force base about thirty, thirty-five miles south of Miami. Essentially this was the overall, broad, general picture that the Deputy Attorney General told us we would be involved in.

When I returned to our own service offices from the Deputy's office, we had a quick staff conference and decided which people would be brought into this from the service to actually run this operation and what parts would be played. We actually formulated every procedure as precisely as it could be to assure an effective operation which would reflect sincere concern by the government for these people. One of the first acts on returning was for me to call our regional office in Richmond, Virginia, which was in the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. At that time, it did and still does exercise supervisory jurisdiction over the district office of the Immigration Service in Miami. I asked at that time specifically for Mr. Robert Schoenenberger, who was then the associate deputy commissioner for operations for that entire region of the Immigration Service, and asked him to immediately come to Washington for detailed consultations and preparation of instructions. I asked for Mr. Schoenenberger at that time because he had previously been associated with me in the central office of the Immigration Service. Since the job called for a person with interest, dependability, and effectiveness, I thought that Bob Schoenenberger would perform the job; so I sent for Bob.

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Also, I determined that Mr. Richard Ffrench, who was then a deputy assistant commissioner for inspections in Washington for the Immigration Service, that he too would play a major role because of his vast experience and expertise on the technicalities of overcoming any legal impediments or objections to bringing people into the United States where no documents were present and little checking could be done with respect to their backgrounds. Because of Dick Ffrench's background in this particular area, he was selected to play a major role. So actually, as soon as we had been told by the deputy's office what our mission was, we began to formulate a composite picture of what staff personnel would operate this entire project; it consisted of myself with Mr. Cull, Mr. Schoenenberger, and Mr. Ffrench. That became, more or less, the team that actually operated the entire exchange down at Homestead Air Force Base, acting for the Attorney General and, in fact, acting for the White House itself. Now, I'll introduce Mr. Richard Ffrench.

FFRENCH:

I'm Richard Ffrench and born in New York City in 1912 and went through the New York school system up to Manhattan

College. I'm a product of the Depression [Great Depression]. I went into the Immigration Service in 1940 as a border patrolman and went through, as Mr. Noto pointed out, to the position of deputy assistant commissioner of inspections in Washington at the time period that the prisoners were released and returned to the United States.

As set forth earlier, when Mr. Noto brought back the news to Washington of the project that was at hand, all of us, including myself, had to work on the inspection procedures that would be used, that could be used, in returning the prisoners to the United States with the least amount of difficulty. In this, I worked very closely with Mr. Schoenenberger of the southeast regional office, who was closer to the Miami district and closer to the inspection procedure than I would be in the central office in Washington. We worked together exceptionally well; the cooperation was 100 percent. We worked out a plan of inspection that, with few changes, carried us through to the time when the prisoners were returned; we performed the inspection as they entered the United States. At the present time this brings me up to Mr. Bob Schoenenberger, now the deputy regional commissioner of the southeast region for the United States Immigration Service.

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SCHOENENBERGER: My name is Robert Schoenenberger, I was born in Iowa in 1918, went through the public school system entered the Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1941 as a patrol inspector at El Paso, Texas. I spent the first fifteen years of my career in the southwest part of the United States in various positions, most of them in the enforcement side of the service, a short stint in the inspection service. I later came to the central office, worked for three years there, two of which were directly for Mr. Noto, after which I was transferred to Richmond, Virginia in 1959—promoted and transferred—to the position of associate deputy regional commissioner in Richmond, for operations. I'm presently the regional commissioner for the southeast region of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

I did a little research, read some of the files that are still around concerning the return of the Bay of Pigs prisoners, and I note that our first conversations and our first planning on this thing, between myself, Mr. Noto, and Mr. Ffrench, began in April of 1962 and continued on and off, since in the return of the prisoners we were entirely dependent upon the Castro government. This thing was first going to happen in April, then it was off. Later it looked like it was going to take place in October. We did much more planning, much more preparation. Then it developed that the Castro government would not release the prisoners until later. Attorney James Donovan [James B. Donovan] had been involved in this thing—from New York City—and most of our, oh well practically I guess all of the government information was being received through him with his negotiations with Castro. It began to develop that it looked favorable that this would happen in December, which it eventually did, on the twenty-third, twenty-fourth of December 1962.

OESTERLE: Well, what went into the preparation? How did you get everything underway?

NOTO: Well, once the Deputy Attorney General, Mr. Katzenbach, had told us what the mission was and what part we would play in this overall project, we began to attend meetings with the other governmental agencies, principally the Defense Department with a General Disosway [Gabriel P. Disosway] and some other Air Force representatives who would be involved because of the military nature of the receiving of these prisoners at Homestead Air Force Base. And another important factor or individual who played an important part was George McManus who was representing the Central Intelligence Agency. Now actually it was McManus

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who would keep referring to what the White House instructions were. He was more or less of a conduit between this entire group and the White House policy group.

CULL: Mario, something hits me at this point. Bob, didn't you say there was talk at one point of going to Opa Locka instead of to Homestead?

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes. This plan...

CULL: Opa Locka is an air base near Miami but more civilian aircraft, isn't that right?

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes. This planning started in April and it was changed, the overall plan was changed many, many, times. We thought they were coming in the spring, and our first thoughts were to use Opa Locka Air Base, which is a World War II air base which has been turned, well, at that time was being used by other government agencies, one of which was ours. We did considerable planning in the early spring and summer and there were, of course, many conferences at the Washington level. I was more or less the field commander carrying out the policies and the instructions that were formulated at the Washington level. This plan was later changed. We even thought of hotels, various different places. I think one time the auditorium at the foot of Biscayne Boulevard was even considered. Eventually, I don't remember, maybe these other two men might know who made the decision to go to Homestead Air Force Base, which was a S.A.C. Air Force base—Strategic Air Command, that is. That was the best decision that was ever made because certainly we had control of the situation; we had security; we had facilities, we had everything that was needed.

CULL: I think that's right. I think the idea was security, and the feeling was that the way this thing was going to be worked, the prime goal was to reunite these prisoners with their families as soon as possible. The thought was that there would be more security, I believe, at Homestead, the S.A.C. base, where these people could be processed in a hurry and then be reunited with their

families at Dinner Key Auditorium in downtown Miami. The families would be there. Isn't that right, Mario?

NOTO: That's right. And Dick, I think you will all recall that at that time there was a tremendous emotional fever.

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CULL: There was.

NOTO: And one of the big fears that we had was that if we did hold the processing at Opa Locka Air Force Base, firstly, it didn't have any actual physical barrier. It had no fencing. And we could not control the movements of a lot of people who were strangers, but were just strict emotionally fed people who were going to attend this because of the history that was taking place here and the impact. So that became one of the real factors why Homestead Air Force Base was picked.

CULL: Homestead would have helped and did help return these prisoners to their families faster than Opa Locka would and that was the goal.

NOTO: You will remember as a sidelight that we had a problem at Homestead Air Force Base and that was because they had live missiles right in the processing area, and you'll all remember that we had plenty of consternation as to what we were going to do with a bunch of prisoners that were coming in plus everybody else involved, all within a foot or two of real live missiles.

SCHOENENBERGER: It might be of interest to this thing to note that the Red Cross, at my direction, set up a coffee stand on a crate, and when the colonel came in he nearly fainted. I asked him what was the matter and he said, "Do you know you're serving coffee off a hydrogen bomb?" [Laughter]

CULL: These are some of the problems we had.

FFRENCH: To get back to who selected the Homestead Air Force Base for the processing center, actually, if my memory serves me correctly, it was President John F. Kennedy himself. He had been briefed preliminarily on the possibility of using Opa Locka. And being well aware of the sensitiveness of the whole situation, people all wrought up going to meet their family, he said, "Well, why not bring them into Homestead Air Force Base? We've got all the people there that can take care of all of the security that we need." And that was the reason that it was brought into Homestead Air Force Base. It had the blessing of the White House.

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NOTO: And actually, if you remember, it turned out that that still was not enough facilities for all of us. You will remember, Bob, we brought in our own radio systems from the U.S. Border Patrol from the southwestern border, and we brought in something like fifty or sixty of our own service cars, and we brought in dozens of U.S. border patrolmen in uniform, out of uniform, and loads of investigators. So actually, even with all the precautions that were taken for Homestead Air Force Base, we still had to rely on a large number of our own service facilities. We actually operated an independent organization within the Homestead Air Force Base. We were under a mandate from Commissioner Farrell, who was injecting himself into this on a very personal basis because he's a very compassionate and very humane individual by nature, and he felt this awesome responsibility also. He told us in no uncertain terms that we were to spare no effort in seeing to it that this thing operated smoothly and that we actually complied with the President's wishes. So despite all of the things that the military had, at times there were shortcomings, unfortunately, and inadvertently.

We in the service felt that we're going to be very self-sufficient, and we started bringing in our own automobiles, our own radio equipment, and a large staff of people. We went so far, if I recall correctly, we even hired a press car, didn't we? We went out and hired some automobiles from one of these drive yourself companies to be sure that the press was given every availability to circulate freely among the prisoners.

CULL: Well, you know, Mario, speaking of the press coverage, it was probably much larger than expected, and of course it was an event that had been building up for a long time and there was great interest in these prisoners because, as we've said here a little earlier, through the year there had been efforts to arrange with the Cuban government to bring them back. These arrangements hadn't worked until the final arrangement for exchanging them through drugs and medical supplies had been arranged. Well, when we finally got to Homestead and it was finally, we thought, set up that these prisoners would be returned, I set up a press headquarters right off of the ramp. As I say, there were several hundred people there. At the base headquarters some short distance away, Dick Phillips [Richard I. Phillips] of the State Department was there, and he was able to coordinate with Washington on the overall conduct of this whole program.

Well, the story was that on December 23, at around dawn the first group of prisoners would arrive. So the night before that at the press headquarters I was working with several air force people and the Red Cross, which was, of course, very much

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involved in this, and we must have called a hundred newspaper, radio, and T.V. outlets everywhere to tell them that the program would start the next morning. Well, we were getting information all the time from Mr. Donovan who was in Cuba with Mr. Castro. And after we had gotten the original information that these people would be in the next morning on the first flight, it was about midnight that we were told, "All bets are off, Mr. Castro has changed it, and they won't be in till later." Well, at that point I began calling the press and radio and

T.V. people back and they weren't very happy about it and I didn't get a lot of them. So the next morning at 6:30 they showed up anyhow for the briefing and we explained the procedure to them of the return of the prisoners. And we went out to the airstrip and as all of you recall it was a very warm day and we began picking up a sunburn early in the morning; this is on December 23.

Well the first plane's arrival, which as I say the night before had been changed to a little later, the first plane didn't show up and I remember—I'd never been on the government side before as a press man, I'd always been on the other side asking questions, and at this point I had to explain and defend this very sensitive project—that Hal Hendrix [Harold Hendrix] of the Miami News, a man that I had known for some time and a very experienced guy, came up to me about two hours after the first plane was supposed to have arrived and said, "Dick, if I were you, I'd get out a statement of some kind, any kind, explaining why the delay because these people think that the whole thing is off." So at that point I got in touch with Dick Phillips in the headquarters, up at the base headquarters, and he was able to get a statement saying: No, Mr. Castro hadn't called it off, that there was just some sort of a delay in getting the planes off. Well, this was suitable, but it just shows you what you have to do to fill a vacuum, because if I hadn't of said that, why, the story would have been rampant that the whole thing was off.

Well, as you know, because of the unpredictability of the people we were working with, it was much later that day—in fact I think it was probably the end of the day on the twenty-third—before we ever got the first plane. And then it was always uncertain, from then until the end of the project the next night, Christmas Eve, just about the time Santa Claus was coming down the chimney, that we finally got the last ones. In between that as, you know, there was great uncertainty about aspects of the program. But as I recall it, Dick, we had interviews with these people in the.... Well, what all did we do for them? We had a meal for them and....

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FFRFNCH: Well, yes we did. We had arrangements to make, of course, with reference to the procedures that were to be followed. If my memory serves me, we met with the commandant of the Homestead Air Force Base, Mr. Noto and Mr. Schoenenberger and myself and you, Dick, and a plan was laid out for receiving these people when they came in. And of course, we couldn't find the proper facility because the General had given the assignment to one of his colonels there to take us around and show us the facilities that we might be able to use. All of them were too small to process the 1,113 passengers in the quickest time. Finally we went back to report to the General that we had the plans all laid out but we didn't have a suitable facility. He said, "Well, what kind of a facility are you looking for?" We showed him something like an armory that was in a square type of building or oblong, and said, "Anything that will give us a straight-line inspection. People should be able to walk in the front door and go through the procedures of public health, and immigration, and customs and walk out the rear door." At which time he said, "Well, why don't you give them the black hangar?" Well, the black hangar was the hangar where all of this material was housed for the missile crisis. And of course, his colonel, the next in charge, said, "The black hangar! We're

not going to give them that.” He says, “Why not? Just tell them to stay inside the building. They won’t get bitten by the dogs.” They had dogs and men patrolling that area. But this was a beautiful facility and we were able to set up an inspection procedure that allowed us to process these people just so rapidly, so rapidly. I think that Mario Noto and Bob Schoenenberger could add to this. They were there and very close to it.

NOTO: I just want to recall something that Dick Cull just said now, which is a little bit on the humorous side, when he mentioned Donovan and Castro. Who has a recollection of the time when we got that urgent message about filling up two cases with Budweiser beer? Do you remember that? Do you remember that when we got a request to get two cases of Bud, for Fidel? Do you remember that, Dick?

ALL: Yes. Sure.

NOTO: We had to get two cases of Budweiser beer and we said, “Good God, for what? We’re not going to take any chance of this becoming a matter of public knowledge.” And they said, “Hell, it’s for Castro. Castro’s asking for Budweiser beer.” And so we said, “Okay.” I forget how we got it into.... Oh, I remember, we sent Bill Kaiser [William Kaiser] out and said, “Don’t care where you buy it but get two cases of Budweiser beer, bring it in.” And we actually put it on one of those DC-3s that was hauling back

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John Nolan who was also....

FFRENCH: John Nolan took it back.

NOTO: John Nolan took it back, who was acting as more of an aide-de-camp to Jim Donovan. I might just say this, which I think, perhaps we’ve touched on briefly, but which from a real governmental viewpoint becomes important. That is the real responsibility that the Immigration Service had. I think the responsibility that was given to Commissioner Farrell by the White House and by the Attorney General was to bring these people, not only in keeping with dignity and an image of concern, but also to do so within the framework of whatever laws we had to operate under. Now Dick touched on it and if I can just elaborate for a moment. Our first real primary problem was that these people had to undergo a regular United States Immigration, a regular U.S. Customs, and a regular U.S. Plant and Quarantine, and a regular U.S. Public Health Service inspection, which is really the required U.S. government inspection of all people who come to the United States. So although this was an extraordinary event, nonetheless we thought that with a little straining here and there, we could actually put ourselves, as an agency, in a position to later say that these people weren’t just brought in helter-skelter, that they were actually brought in within the definitions of law and with having undergone the type of inspections that are actually required by statute of any

person who comes into the country. And we did do that. This is where, of course, the good expertise came in of both Dick Ffrench and Bob Schoenenberger. So that was taken care of because of very carefully selected U.S. Immigration officers that we brought in and who were given very detailed instructions both by Bob and Dick. So that was one phase of it. They had to go through a regular inspection, as I said earlier: Immigration, Customs, Plants and Quarantine, and Public Health. In line with that we ran into a problem which was that the Dade County authorities where we were operating were very adamant in requiring an x-ray of the chest for TB [tuberculosis] and when we tried it, it was just impossible. We just couldn't do it. It was too much of a physical impediment to a smooth flow of traffic. And I remember that we had countless discussions, not only with the Dade County authorities of the state of Florida, but with U.S. Public Health officials here in Washington, both on the phone and off the phone. We finally overcame that and they actually agreed to waive the TB inspection for that arrival but to come in to do it at a later date.

The next thing was, once these people had gone through this inspection, and here, because of our awareness for the security aspect of this—because I think it ran through everybody's mind that

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there was always a possibility of a spy coming through or a subversive agent coming through—we went ahead and prepared a regular questionnaire type that would contain the responses to questions usually asked by the regular U.S. Immigration officers. So that gave us more or less of a permanent record of who came in, who they were, with enough data behind it to let us follow through on these people. So the first phase was to actually get them through an inspection as required by law. Secondly was to actually take preventive precautions against infiltration of subversive elements, which we did through the screening because the U.S. Immigration officers were very well trained in this aspect. Their method of interrogation is such that they can elicit the type of data that will immediately detect a suspicious person.

Now then, on top of that we have the human aspect, or rather the lighter aspect to this and that was to get these people clothes, because Castro sent them over all in yellow clothes which was the mark of a coward; he called them the worms, the gusanos. And we had to give them clothes which were furnished to us by the military, and also to be given one good meal before they could join their family. Now if you could try to visualize this, you have an assembly line operation. They would get off the airplane and go through a regular inspection by the U.S. Immigration officers; they would be given, not a delousing, but let's say a body inspection when they removed their clothes, and then they would be given their medical. There were doctors there; there were nurses there. They were given a regular medical and then they were put through the processing by Immigration, getting answers to their questions, and then taking them through to dinner. As soon as they were through with their first dinner there, why, they were then taken into buses. The buses would immediately, as soon as they got loaded up, take them down to Dinner Key where the actual reunion with the families would take place. They never actually met with the families at Homestead. A lot of families and Cubans tried to get around the outskirts of Homestead Air Force Base, but because of security they were not allowed in. But the very first time that these prisoners met their

families was actually in Dinner Key which was a large reception area that Mayor King— [Robert King High] I think at that time Bob High—of Miami and the Cuban community set up as a sort of a welcoming thing.

One other thing that I want to mention lest I forget and that was that because of the deep concern that the service had in truly carrying out the President's wishes, and we'd keep emphasizing over and over again, that is to convince everybody that this was just not a scheme, but this was a genuine concern by this government for the welfare of these people and their safety to bring them back. We in the Immigration Service brought

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in the girl employees who we had in the service at that time who were classified as port receptionists. These girls were stationed at airports around the country to facilitate the traveling of people coming in, the old, and the very young, and people who may have had language difficulties. Now these were the girls that had been selected by the Immigration Service and truly projected the first American image when you'd land in this country. And we brought girls in from all over the United States who worked for the Immigration Service and brought them there for the purpose of lending female assistance in the sense... [Interruption] Even a tough Immigration officer who may look like a real big tough man but who's got a real weak heart and he's just as soft as can be, but he's not going to create that physical image that the girl can. I remember that we sat down, Dick Cull, and Bob Schoenenberger, and Dick Ffrench... [Interruption] The girl who we had on our payroll, do you remember what was her first name? Bolivar. What was her first name?

SCHOENENBERGER: Maria.

NOTO: Maria. [Interruption]¹
Those girls were under Immigration's instructions that they had to go up the steps when the doors would open up on the airplane with the prisoners arriving. And they and the U.S. Public Health Service officer—I remember you used to use that expression, "He's got to break quarantine," and I never knew what it meant, but you kept saying, "He's got to break quarantine." But he would go up the ladder, and I mean, you've got to see that type of an airplane, a DC-6 or a DC-7, there on the runway, hundreds of people here and I finally called Dick and about two hundred newspapermen and cameramen and T.V. and... [Interruption] The moment that they would see that girl come in there—and I'm sure that Bob and Dick here have a lot of stories about some real emotional, intense scenes—you could just hear that shouting. I suppose that nobody can really quiet the fury of man better than just a pretty, attractive girl. [Interruption] If they had any feelings about shaking their fists and saying, "Where were you at the Cuban Bay of Pigs?" certainly, all that vanished as soon as they landed and they saw American soil and American faces.

¹ Teleprinter in adjoining room began operating, and automatic morse signal periodically obliterated taped conversation. Cause of the proceeding interruptions.

CULL: Yes, I remember, Mario, Attorney General Kennedy's great interest in the planning of this project because when I first got the press assignment I know that he talked to me and to Dick Phillips of the State Department. He was concerned that these prisoners who naturally, after twenty months in the Isle of Pines were pretty bitter about their fate, would make some unfortunate remarks when they

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got off the plane to the press in Miami, some remarks about their feelings about the failure to, what they thought was to give them adequate air cover and other protections for their invasion. So he asked that Enrique Ruiz-Williams, who had been in the Bay of Pigs prisoners' brigade and had been wounded and therefore was one of the companions of these prisoners, might go along on the planes that went back and forth during this project to bring these people back. And Harry did, and did a fine job, just, you know, nothing more than explaining to these people that he understood their feelings but that the country was concerned about them and wanted them returned and hoped they would understand. I remember him talking about how these prisoners, once they'd come across the Straits of Florida and finally hit the United States soil again, would look out the window and holler, "Viva United States. Viva Kennedy." They were coming home. And then, as you know, we were all out on the runway when they arrived, and many of them would get off the airplane and would kiss the ground...

FFRENCH: That's true.

CULL: And the abrazo or the embrace of their friends. It was a very emotional reunion.

SCHOENENBERGER: One interesting emotional thing that happened, to continue what you just said, this girl, the Bolivar girl, bent down—some of these prisoners were in pretty bad physical shape if you remember, and when they landed it was a very emotional thing to be back in the United States and the tears, were coming down his cheeks—and the Bolivar girl wiped a tear away from his eye, bent down and wiped a tear away. That then became one of the most emotional scenes that happened in the entire thing. He jumped up and took a rosary that he had carved during his months in prison in the Isle of Pines and took it off of his body and put it around her neck. It was one of the most touching things I've ever seen.

Before we go any further, I'd like to get in here, none of us have mentioned this. Mr. Noto has very adequately described the system, the assembly line processing and so forth, assisted by Dick. But if you remember, gentlemen, Mr. Castro was not the least bit cooperative during this thing and we had all of these people out here and all of this thing set up for a continuous span of thirty-eight hours with very, very little sleep. One of the things, if you will remember, that comes to my mind since you bring this all out, they'd bring the prisoners up to the airfield in Cuba—we found this out from the people

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that went over—and Castro would come out on the airfield and walk around. Then, maybe they'd have a race between an Oldsmobile 88 and a motor cycle, and that would take half the afternoon on the airstrip, while we had all this standing by on the other side and it was nip and tuck, and touch and go for thirty-eight hours whether we were going to get anybody, if you remember. Do you remember that?

SCHOENENBERGER: Many, many, many, false alarms.

FFRENCH: Sure. Many false alarms too.

CULL: And of course, Bob, in that regard, the press trying to carry the story to the countries around the world didn't know any of this...

SCHOENENBERGER: No.

FFRENCH: ...and could only suspect that the project was off and that that Castro had decided to, well, thumb his nose at us. So we were just up against it.

NOTO: Do you remember this too, that the damn uncertainty of the time element was always a real bother because we had a lot of personnel, as Bob said, and it was real hot, and especially those girls. We finally, on an amusing side, we had ambulances there and we used to allow these girls to sleep in the ambulances so that if a plane showed up on the horizon everybody'd be on duty, spic and span. But correct me if I'm wrong on this. At one time, we used to run into some difficulties or misunderstandings there with the Air Force people as to did the plane leave or didn't it leave, because to us split timing was very important because it's only about a twenty-minute flight. And we finally said, "The heck with all this." You called, or you made arrangements with Bill Moriarity [William Moriarity] who was in the immigration office at Miami and he made arrangements with Pan Am [Pan American World Airlines Incorporated], whom he had close associations with, and we would know the moment that the plane would leave because Pan American Airways was handling the physical transportation feature to this. So our feeling was that the pilot's got to tell him, he's got to break radio silence and tell them when he's coming in. This was one way that we could find out. As a matter of fact, again if memory serves me correct, we immigration people actually knew before the entire world knew about it. We knew about it when the plane actually

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had departed because we found out through Pan Am.

CULL: And Mario, I recall so many of the especially radio people who were in the press coverage who had, well, they said, contacts

with Havana radio through their Miami stations or through their shortwave stations who knew, they said, that the plane had taken off and were asking me to confirm it. I couldn't confirm it because I knew they hadn't left, but well, I was just trying to parry their questions and to do the best I could. In other words to convey the impression that the program hadn't ended, that it was just being delayed. But of course, this was a peril all through the day.

NOTO : You know there's one incident that I don't think we've touched or which, in my way of thinking, adds a little humor and tragedy at the same time. I just had given Bob a little note here that I thought he had been involved in it, but he refreshed my memory that he was sitting at the control center at the Homestead Air Force Base. My memory's a little hazy on this but somehow or other do you remember that I was told that I had to go and to meet at a rendezvous point in some cocktail lounge across the 36th Street Airport in Miami...

FFRENCH: You went alone on that, Mario.

NOTO: ...and had to be there at about 2 o'clock in the morning. Now the whole reason behind this—cloak and dagger. And my only instructions at that time—I can't even remember who gave them to me—was to proceed to this cocktail lounge and there I would meet with former Surgeon General Heath [Frederick C. Heath] and his party, and we would then proceed. Oh yeah, I remember what it was. Castro had a lot of doubts as to the medicine that he was getting in that old flat boat that he was getting, if you remember. One thing that our side of this deal had done was they just told him that here was a case of a hundred bottles of aspirin. But Castro was astute and wanted to know how many aspirins in each bottle, you know. So if you remember I was to go there because Castro was sending in three Red Cross people to inspect the boat, which was tied up at Fort Lauderdale. Now I think the reason that I was involved on that, if I recall, is that here were Castro Cuban Red Cross officials who were coming into the United States and all this was going to be done very, quietly, very surreptitiously as a matter of fact, and I was supposed to give them their inspection

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for the United States government, to allow them to enter. And I remember—I mentioned this to you, Bob, I'm sure that night—I took two or three border patrol cars. And I know who was with me. He's now one of the sector chiefs, Dino...

SCHOENENBERGER: Elmo Rainbolt [Elmo M. Rainbolt].

NOTO: Elmo Rainbolt. That's it. He was with me, and we had three other patrol cars to follow because we didn't know what kind of a mission this was. I remember going into the cocktail lounge about 2 o'clock in the morning. I don't mind saying that I was darned annoyed with this whole thing because...

FFRENCH: We'd had no sleep here.

NOTO: ...I couldn't see this cloak and dagger stuff; we hadn't had sleep for days. I remember walking into this smoke-filled cocktail lounge and you could hardly see, and here were all these girls dressed up with these golden sequins at 2 o'clock in the morning and I couldn't see my way. I couldn't see anybody I was supposed to rendezvous. I remember going up to the bar to kill time, at 2 o'clock in the morning and I needed that like a hole in the head, but I ordered a scotch. And I said to the girl at the bar, how much was it, and she said, "A dollar fifty." I gave her two dollars and told her to keep the change. I remember her saying, "You're the last of the big time spenders." [Laughter] So I looked around the cocktail lounge and I still couldn't see a living soul that I could remember. And I was not frustrated, but I was just darned mad. I walked out and saw Rainbolt again and I says, "I've got a good notion to go back." And if you remember, Bob, you got me on the radio and you were trying to tell me that—what was it that you were trying to tell me? You told me to get back. The General wanted me...

SCHOENENBERGER: That's right. I was trying to encourage you not to leave.
[Laughter]

NOTO: And I said to Bob, "Tell him to go to heck because I got my orders to be here, I mean I'm getting my orders from a different source." Then I remember going back to the cocktail lounge, about oh, a half hour later and by now, it was around 3 o'clock. I told Rainbolt, "Well, I've got orders to meet them here." And I go in there, and I go back again, and of course I meet the same girl at the bar again and she says, "Does Big Diamond Jim Brady want another one of the same?" [Laughter]

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Then finally I did run into them and they were there, about four or five of them, and who do they have with them but a couple of little old American Red Cross ladies.

We all got into a car and we all went to the 36th Street Airport. We were just slouching around—by this time it was 4 o'clock in the morning—when all of a sudden in the quiet of night this little, small DC-3 comes in. And it is a small, chartered Pan American DC-3, and out step these three Cuban fellows dressed with the usual fatigues that you see Castro with. I introduced myself to them and they said, "Well, we give you our passports." And I said, "I'm not going to inspect you. Just get here to do whatever you're going to do." I remember what Bob was trying to tell me; Bob was trying to tell me on the radio that one of them was an intelligence chief. Of course, both Bob and I had worked on subversive matters for the Immigration Service so that we weren't exactly novices to the subversive elements. But we took these three fellows with the Red Cross cars in sort of an entourage and we all drove like mad up to Fort Lauderdale to go see that boat. I went on board the boat to watch them. These three Cuban allegedly Red Cross officials were making a rather cursory

examination of the boxes. I remember distinctly they didn't say they were satisfied or not satisfied. They just simply said that they wanted to talk to Fidel. We drove them to a motel not far from Fort Lauderdale port, which was guarded by our own U.S. Border Patrol, and we chose them because of their dependability as contrasted to the local law enforcement agencies or other. We just trusted our own at that time. We were afraid that if word of this leaked out, there could be attempted assassination of three top-level Cuban officials.

So they sat there in the room and they actually did talk to Castro. What was said, I don't know, but they did. But there was quite a bit of conversation back and forth. We subsequently found out that what they were told was, "Be sure that you get invoices for this." But the part that is a little amusing there is that, if you remember, the three of them decided that they wanted to stay there overnight, and we said, "Heck no, you're not going to stay here overnight because we feel the risk of assassination's too much." We finally convinced them, and then with our own U.S. Border Patrol escort we got them back to the airfield, the 36th Street Airport in Miami, oh, and around 7 o'clock in the morning, before anybody knew what was really happening, the three of them got on board that flight and flew right back to Havana. And you know it was not until months and months later that that story—somebody actually leaked it out. But that actually was carried out without anybody knowing about it.

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OESTERLE: Was the pilot waiting in the plane?

NOTO: I don't know if he was right in the plane but he was right around it. Now this was a C.I.A. [Central Intelligence Agency] project because.... And again, I mean, there's a lot of humor to this. I remember meeting an agent from that agency who was involved in this. He had one of these long mustaches, you know, and he looked like a real character out of a book. At a time like that you still retain some semblance of humor, you know. We sort of got a big chuckle out of this because there was really no need for all of this cloak and dagger at that moment because they were coming in. They had a legitimate reason for coming in, they wanted to check on the cargo. And all of this identification by symbols and fictitious names, et cetera, was just immaterial. The thing is just get them in here, go look at that boat and get them out of here and get them back to Havana.

OSTERLE: Identification by symbols?

NOTO: Well, as to who was who. In other words, if these were really the three officials that were representing Castro. Although they had army fatigues, you know, they didn't have any insignia other than just—that plain green fatigue I think is what Castro wears. But these people that were the intermediaries were talking, you know, I'm so and so and using certain names and symbols for identification purposes.

OESTERLE: Just a couple of other questions. Did the invoices present a problem or did you happen to have invoices?

NOTO: We know what happened but I think if you're going to talk to Don Coppock, wouldn't he be the one to...

SCHOENENBERGER: He knows more about it, but I think we could go ahead and tell him there were invoices because I saw them.

NOTO: Well, what they had to do if you recall, fellows, they had to prepare invoices for each box. In other words the invoices, you see, were deficient in stating the actual quantity because you can ship a box containing a hundred bottles of aspirin but that doesn't tell you how many aspirins you're getting, which was a valid point raised by the Castro representatives. Then I think

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what Don Coppock, who is with Immigration, did with other people from the Department of Justice was to sit down and go through all of these invoices and fill in the actual quantity and those were in turn sent to Castro, and he accepted them. Say, what was that incident with Charly Siragusa [Charles Siragusa] from Narcotics and Henry Giordano [Henry L. Giordano]?

SCHOENENBERGER: Well, a lot of the cargo was narcotics. That was something they were definitely short of there.

NOTO: Tell them the story about the two narcotics agents who were not going to give that shipment clearance to leave in exchange for the prisoners.

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes. This ship contained many millions of dollars worth of medicine, things that Cuba was desperately short of, one of which was morphine and was contributed largely by the large pharmaceutical companies throughout the United States. One of the problems that arose, there was considerable difficulty in the Bureau of Narcotics, who had agents there, on granting the proper departure manifest for the overwhelmingly large amount of morphine that was involved. But they finally got the message, I think, from the White House, and it went through.

OESTERLE: They were talking about holding it up?

SCHOENBERGER: Oh, yes. For a little while they were which was rather amusing to me. [Laughter] But this was more or less as it was stated in the paper, the ransom paid for the return of the prisoners. I don't know the exact value of all these drugs, but it was very high, very high but came largely from the American industry.

NOTO: I might go back a step on this because I think sometimes even we ourselves forget the bigger part that immigration played in this. In my opinion, I think Immigration played even a bigger role than we ourselves are capable of considering. What brings it to mind is this. Do you remember when we got wind of this thing up here in Washington that we sat down here and for days on end we prepared detailed operational plan of how this thing would work out step by step? That was because that's our way, that's the way Immigration work did. Commissioner Farrell would insist that before we did anything that everything had to be pinpointed in black and white. In other words an operational plan, which is the right way to do it.

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OSTERLE: This is the blue book.

NOTO: Well, blue book, whatever, you'd have a portfolio. Anyway it was a plan of action, step by step what to do, which we would use for actual physical rehearsal. It was like writing a script to a play and you take into consideration all of the conceivable contingencies and you try to eliminate them. And when we got to Homestead Air Force Base, if you fellows recall, we had a real late meeting that General Catton [Jack J. Catton] called one night, and he brought his entire staff there. We sat in on it, and of course we took a little bit of a backseat because this was a military base and we were more or less guests. General Catton at that time was commanding this situation from his viewpoint, and he began to make assignments to the various staff officers at his command to specific responsibilities. For instance, one man would take care of the clothing aspect, one would come up with a plan of movement of vehicles. In other words, something almost akin to what we had done. But the thing that triggered us off a little bit was that here we had spent so much time on the detailed planning, and our planning, of course, was a little more detailed because we were considering compliance with existing laws. We were determined that, while we could understand the motivation of the President in bringing these unfortunate individuals here, that later on critics of this entire movement could very well find holes in this entire operation, even to the point of perhaps alleging various illegalities that were involved, that these people were not here legally; that, in other words, there was something wrong with this whole thing, and that by doing that you can cast a complete cloud on its effectiveness. [Interruption]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

Well, I can wind this up. The thing was that we in Immigration had our mandate from our Commissioner who in turn had been given his mandate from the Attorney General. And it wasn't just a case of doing blindly—just bringing them in. We felt that it was our responsibility as administrators in carrying out the President's wishes to be sure to it that we were protecting him against any possible criticism that could be leveled at him in the future for political exploitation or even for whatever reasons might exist. So the point I make is that

our plan of operation, or our blue book, was in such shape that it had a step by step outline and with full compliance of all law.

Now the military that night, when they called the staff meeting, the General then assigned specific assignments to his staff,

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various steps of it which, of course, were strictly from a military viewpoint, the physical implementation of this plan of receiving these people and letting them off the base from a viewpoint of what you had on that base. Ours was a much broader and much more detailed plan. So we took exception to the General on that. And I remember saying to him that I thought all this was unnecessary because we had spent a great deal of time, and frankly we were more satisfied with what we had than what they could come up with because there were a lot of technicalities involved here that a military would never consider, not because of inability, but because it wasn't within their line of thinking. They're just not geared to that. And I think General Catton at that time was pretty fair about it, and he more or less issued some orders to some of his officers to go along with some of our wishes and to subordinate their wishes because the overall responsibility really was with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

FFRENCH: I think, Mario, he told them, if I remember correctly, to give us what we wanted, period.

NOTO: Especially on the building that you mentioned before.

FFRENCH: That's right. And he said to make sure that we got what we needed to operate properly. And I think you got that across to him and he right away recognized it and then had his people supporting us. In other words, if we needed cars, get cars; if you needed this, get that. But as far as the inspection procedures were concerned, as Mario pointed out earlier, we were given the responsibility for it, but we had to deal also with the Public Health Service. They had not been brought in at the work level in the beginning. We were the ones that had to bring them into the operation. The same with the Customs Service. If we didn't there would be complaints later, or people could say, "Well, how do we know that these people aren't diseased that are coming in?" and so on. So in other words, we had all of these plans arranged at previous meetings both at the Washington level, at the Miami level with the U.S. Public Health Service, and the local public health services. We had it all lined up. It was our idea that we had to go through with all of these procedures, which are spelled out in the law.

CULL: I think that I recall a number of inquiries from the press, not only the press on the grounds, but I remember I think I may have had twenty telephones in that headquarters and this thing had

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attracted such interest that... There were fifty you say, Bob? Fifty. Well it seemed for thirty-six hours there that they were all ringing at one time. [Laughter] But I know that we were getting radio stations calling in and just pleading for us to give them a minute or two on the arrivals. Now of course they would be interested if there was anybody from their home area. But primarily the people on the grounds, the press on the grounds, radio and T.V., and the people who called in, were interested in how these people looked. And I'd have to say that although I think, as someone mentioned earlier, that their dress was pretty poor, they were just in denims, that they looked better than we thought they would look. They didn't seem to be as underfed maybe as we expected or that they had been physically abused. All of which seemed to lead to the feeling that Castro had planned to make this exchange and maybe for the recent period before they arrived had fed them pretty well to make sure that they'd look fairly well-fed when they did arrive. And they looked better than I thought they would.

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes, they really did. They didn't look bad at all.

NOTO: Bob, what was that incident you were talking about before when I said, "You be sure to tell that one too," but we just talked about it.

SCHOENENBERGER: About the Bolivar girl and the rosary beads, wasn't it?

NOTO: No. You gave that. Just before when I was coming out with the plans.

SCHOENENBERGER: Oh, you were speaking of the fact that we had our plan drawn up in great detail and down to the slightest detail. And then the military had their own plan and then we went into the meeting and said the military plan in effect, to make a long story short, didn't fit all of the ins and outs of our plan. So that's when I admired this General Jack Catton so greatly. He immediately saw it, which some of his people couldn't see it, and said, "Well, you fit your plan to their plan and you give these people what they want. We're here to support them." Do you remember?

NOTO: Yes.

SCHOENENBERGER: And I have always admired that man. He was a great leader of men who in my opinion could really make decisions. And I think events have proved out. I heard just the other day from a general

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friend of mine that he's now a four star general. I really admired him.

CULL: I just want to say one thing I remember from that one meeting. We had a board-of-directors-size meeting in that room with all

the agencies involved, and he looked around at everyone there, Customs, Immigration, Public Health and his own Air Force people, and he looked at one of us in Immigration, I think it was Mr. Noto, and he said, "Mr. Noto, the turkey's around your neck."

SCHOENENBERGER: Right. I remember that.

NOTO: Did he say that?

SCHOENENBERGER: He sure did.

CULL: He said it was our responsibility.

NOTO: That's right. And I think we really ought to record the fact that at no time did anybody in Immigration try to disabuse this idea. As a matter of fact we kept saying, "It is our responsibility; we've been given the mandate. Let us do it our way because we're going to take the rap for it whether it's good or bad." But more importantly, we really felt that we had more of a feel for this than other people who were involved in it.

Well, Bob mentioned about the fifty telephones. Do you remember when we found ourselves really cut short on telephones? Do you remember that Arthur Lazell [J. Arthur Lazell] who was representing at that time Health, Education and Welfare, they had a Cuban refugee center. The regular United States Health, Education, and Welfare Department from Washington had a Cuban refugee office located in Miami and their representative at that time was a gentleman called Arthur Lazell. We brought him in with us. And you remember the Red Cross man, Bighinatti [Enso V. Bighinatti]? Biggy we'd call him. These people were all more or less in with us and we suddenly found ourselves that there was a lot of activity; we didn't have enough telephones, enough space. Well, we crowded ourselves into space. And we had no telephones, and I don't know how we did it but it was somebody in Immigration, one of our officers there, we got him on it. It was almost incredible that working right through the night we had an entire, whole telephone system put in, all new, and we offered lines to the Red Cross...

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FFRENCH: Well, we gave Bighinatti a phone.

NOTO: We gave the American Red Cross a telephone, which they didn't have. We brought Lazell in in Health, Education, and Welfare. In other words, what we did was to actually assume a giant step forward.

In some instances, I don't think we can deny that we stepped on some toes.

FFRENCH: I would say so.

NOTO: Well, it's true. But at a time like that, you know, when you're not only in a fever pitch.... Remember this, there was always one underlying uncertainty, you never knew when that plane was going to land. And remember this. You remember all the cameras that were on that apron on the landing strip, which meant that that first plane was going to be the image cast through this entire project for the entire world. So our fear was, that has got to be absolutely impeccable because if something goes wrong there, then no matter what good you do, the image is gone. So that when you're operating with the uncertainty, you didn't know when Castro might just suddenly say, "Well, get this plane off," and you find a plane in your apron in fifteen, twenty minutes—it would take us just as long to get to the apron—time became a real important factor to us.

FFRENCH: I'd like to clear up one thing, Mario. The fifty telephones that I was referring to were for the press. There were about two hundred pressmen there and they each wanted a telephone themselves so that they could not be scooped—they could all get their calls in at the same time, remember?

NOTO: Yes.

FFRENCH: And you're speaking of another phone.

NOTO: I was speaking about the telephones that we had in our office with our own radio station which we were operating to give, you know, orders to our—we had cruising cars. We couldn't have operated without our own radio because we were spread out through this entire Homestead Air Force Base.

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OESTERLE: How many men and young women were involved in your operations?

NOTO: How many border patrolmen, Bob, did you bring in?

SCHOENENBERGER: I'll get that for you in a few minutes if you'd like.

OESTERLE: Also, whose toes did you step on? [Laughter]

NOTO: I think it's fair...

SCHOENENBERGER: A couple of the other government agencies.

OESTERLE: Were there any amusing incidents that you can recount?

SCHOENENBERGER: Oh, yes. The C.I.A. at one particular time were there and began giving instructions to our border patrol; they didn't have any personnel there. Things got pretty fouled up and I remember we went down and set him straight who was running the thing. It was a bad scene. Do you remember that?

NOTO: Yes, I remember that.

SCHOENENBERGER: And several of the fellows still compliment us on having done that.

NOTO: Well, we didn't step...

SCHOENENBERGER: I guess we stepped on toes all over the place.

NOTO: We stepped on toes, but it was a case of necessity more than—not pride or any selfish motive. It was just a case of you just had limited time, and uncertain unlimited time within which to do these things. Talk about an amusing incident. Well, there was one colonel there who—and I'm not being critical of him from a personal viewpoint—but he just felt that he had to do it his way. And we said that while we appreciated it, it had to be done our way because we had a larger concept. We had an exchange of words and feelings which were a little bit on the bitter side. But he proved himself to be a real good fellow when, after it was all over, I remember he came over to me and asked me if I was a fishing

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man, and I said, "No, I didn't fish," but I asked him why. And he said, well, he wanted to give me as a gift, you know, one of these here suits...

SCHOENENBERGER: A fisherman's wetsuit?

NOTO: No, what the aviator's use, like a jumpsuit, you know. And it was a gorgeous thing and I really appreciated that gesture on his part. He sort of endeared himself to my heart and we ended up being real good friends despite the fact that we had had more than harsh words on this whole project.

But it was the kinds of thing that I don't think you can be critical of individuals or even an agency, because regardless of the motivation, they're all anxious to get into the act. And especially if anyone hears, you know, well, the President wants this; everybody feels that they want to be in the line of fire so that when the medals are given out everybody can get a medal. So you can't be critical of them for that reason and we didn't try to push them out for trying to not share the glory. That wasn't the point at all. The point was that we knew specifically what was wanted and we also knew the pitfalls to avoid for later political

exploitation. So that it was very essential that this operation run not only smoothly but at the same time it was supposed to run lawfully.

Do you remember the incident, wasn't it suggested to us that we were going to pick four prisoners to send them to Palm Beach for Christmas Eve to be with the President?

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes.

CULL: Well, I think they did go, didn't they?

OESTERLE: Was that down to the Wrightsman [Charles B. Wrightsman] house?

NOTO: Yeah. It's in Palm Beach. I don't recall the details of that, but...

CULL: Yes, they did go.

NOTO: Who picked those four people, do you remember?

SCHOENENBERGER: We did.

NOTO: We did?

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SCHOENENBERGER: I think so, didn't we?

FFRENCH: I don't remember offhand, Bob. I don't think I was that close to it.

NOTO: I think Bob's right, because I remember we had some real reservations, you know. Well, how can we be sure that one of them, when they televise this scene with the President over a crackling fireplace that he's not going to turn around and say something that could prove embarrassing to.... I think...

SCHOENENBERGER: I'll tell you about the people there. You wanted to know how many people we had there. We had 20 investigators, 22 immigrant inspectors, 65 border patrolmen, and 22 port receptionists.

NOTO: About 125. And vehicles, we had a good number of vehicles.

SCHOENENBERGER: Oh yeah, we had, oh, I guess we had approximately twenty vehicles out there, thirty I guess. Two-way radios who had their own mobile radio network, base stations, and so forth.

FFRENCH: I think it might be a good idea too to mention before we got down to Homestead Air Force Base that of course this plan, this portfolio of procedures to be followed including all the agencies, had to be cleared here at Washington level with all these agencies. I mean we had the State Department, we had Immigration, we had Public Health, we had Customs, we had the CIA. And you know, when you set forth a plan like this you've got guys there ready to sharp shoot it to death, particularly for their own outfit and not meaning to do any harm to the program but thinking maybe they should be given a little more to do. So once you had that all cleared, and you got down there to Homestead and were dealing with some of the local fellows like the fellow you mentioned before in the C.I.A., he wasn't at the Washington meetings and of course he feels that he should get a little more involved here locally. And this is why he would be giving instructions to the border patrol and so on.

NOTO: I think we ought to mention too there's a little, on the human side of it, Dick Ffrench's daughter was there participating as one of the girls in the program.

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SCHOENENBERGER: One of the most outstanding girls in the program, I might add.

NOTO: Yeah, and one of the pretty ones. But the thing is there's a real feeling to that because I have a distinct recollection of old Dick standing there when the first plane came through, and I remember this, Dick; it made a hell of an impression on me. Dick was standing there right next to us on the apron, you know, when the first plane landed and he had these old big tears rolling down that face of his and it was quite a sight to see. A lot of us were really touched with it, but in his case, I mean, he was there standing with his daughter standing right next to him too so that you had a little bit of a human touch to this over and above that which ordinarily would take place.

SCHOENENBERGER: It might be of interest, and I'm not much of a statistician, but it might be of interest that there were 1,102 Cubans, 10 United States citizens, and 5 Spaniards, making a total of 1,117 people returned, prisoners returned on December 23 and 24, 1962.

NOTO: Yes. You know, Bob, I've got something that I still keep. As a matter of fact I have it up in the office in New York and I more or less treasure it as a memento. But one of them, and I can't remember who it was at this time, I had his name marked but I lost the slip. He gave me a handkerchief with all their names on it that had been written out in ink, you know; it was a yellow handkerchief. I really prize that. I have had the thing put on two pieces of glass and a frame so that it's transparent on both sides. This was another manifestation of some of the appreciation that they had, that they were willing to share—such as this man gave the girl the

cross and some gave them rosary beads. These were manifestations of gratitude because these were things that these people had done during their period of imprisonment and to them it had a very definite sentimental value, despite the fact that it may have been on the unpleasant side. But they were willing to give you these things here which I regarded as a real act of appreciation. I think somebody ought to go into that midnight scene when the last plane landed with that embracing with—when Donovan was embraced by the head of the Cuban committee. Do you remember that? And the automobile incident.

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes. Do you remember when Donovan came to the door of the airplane and you and I were standing at the foot of the steps and he said, “Oh, not you two again.” Remember that?

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NOTO: Yes.

SCHOENENBERGER: Remember that? We’d been associated with Donovan in another case, in the case of an espionage agent, Rudolph Abel [Rudolph Ivanovich Abel]—Noto and myself—and he was the defense attorney.

NOTO: That’s right, that’s right. Yes. Yes.

SCHOENENBERGER: He couldn’t believe that he was seeing the same people.

OESTERLE: The two of you together.

SCHOENENBERGER: And we were on the other side of the fence in this case. In that case we were on the enforcement side and in this case we were on the humanitarian side.

NOTO: I think somebody ought to recite that last scene, because—incidentally I have a picture of that that’s framed at home.

CULL: I wonder if we might get President Kennedy’s remarks at that time which of course are mentioned here, and I’m sure that they must be recorded someplace, you know, about...

SCHOENENBERGER: It might be of some interest also that there were ten flights.

NOTO: Yeah, that’s important.

SCHOENENBERGER: This was December 23 and 24—average flight was, oh, they ranged from 93 persons to as high as 168 persons per flight.

NOTO: Of course you know, we haven't gotten to the point yet of the exchange of prisoners or the family on that tugboat.

SCHOENENBERGER: No.

NOTO: Remember that? Fort Lauderdale. [Interruption]

CULL: I was saying the other day that after we finished at Homestead, we went to Miami

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and were there on Christmas Day to... [Interruption]

NOTO: Yeah, because the last flight came in on Christmas morning at about 1:30, wasn't it?

CULL: A little before midnight.

NOTO: A little before midnight. Because after it was all back, remember we all went back to the motel and we all had a bit to eat and we sort of had a drink. And then the next morning, we drove up to Miami and if you'll recall we had our Christmas dinner, it was Royal Castle hamburgers [Laughter]

FFRENCH: Yeah, that's true.

NOTO: Remember that? We went to the restaurant...

CULL: I remember how well it was just before midnight because I know that after the last plane came in, and after General Catton and Mr. Donovan had made their final remarks that the press people went back to the press headquarters, where Bob says there were some fifty phones set up, to call in their stories. Wasn't this a Saturday night? And there was a Sunday paper for them, I believe it was.

SCHOENENBERGER: It was December 24 and the last plane came in at 10:45 p.m.

CULL: Well, I believe it was a Saturday night. And they went back into the press headquarters to call their newspapers, but they couldn't get off of the base because the little town of Homestead, which had one or two gals on the switchboard, had closed up the switchboard to go home for Christmas. The reporters couldn't get their stories out anyhow.

NOTO: Why don't we tell them about our own living arrangement when

we were living at bachelor quarters and the Air Force gave us all of those little bitsy miniatures; remember that?

FFRENCH: Yes, I sure do.

NOTO: Well, I think we ought to clarify the record on that. What actually happened was that

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we as civilians were given quarters to live in on Homestead Air Force Base which were called the bachelors officers quarters.

SCHOENENBERGER: We paid for them.

NOTO: We paid for them and we paid for all the rest. We asked if we could have privileges, you know, of also being able to buy some liquor so that we could have a cocktail because we used to use these rooms you see, twenty-four hours around the clock. As a matter of fact we used to send people to go there to wash up and change clothes because we had no...

FFRENCH: On relief shifts.

NOTO: Yes, because we had no facilities. And as we mentioned earlier, and I think Bob said and I had forgotten that we had as many as twenty-two girls, and these girls you see had hardly any living facilities and they'd been up on their feet for about forty-eight hours. So the idea was to get them to change a bit and lie down a bit.

SCHOENENBERGER: Keep'em pretty.

NOTO: Yeah, that is to keep them pretty, you know, for the scenario. But what happened was that we told the army, "Well, you ought to give us a bottle or two here so that once in a while we can all sit down and relax for a minute." The next thing I know is—Am I correct? We went back and we found hundreds of these miniature bottles, airline bottles, you know, for a dollar each. And we weren't aware of the fact that we were going to be paying for all of this because there were hundreds of bottles there. We used to keep telling people, "Oh, when you stop get yourself a couple of bottles, you know, and you can have a drink." And later on we had to call the airlines, Air Force and say, "Get all of these bottles out of here," because we were being billed for hundreds and hundreds of dollars of bottles. [Laughter] Well, these are some of the lighter sides of the...

OESTERLE: They were charging you airline rates though...

SCHOENENBERGER: No, officers club rates.

NOTO: No, officers' club rates. Incidentally, going back to that boat, that S.S. African Pilot—I was going to call it the S.S. African Queen, but that's a movie—but we were involved in that. We had another problem there, which was that this boat looked just like the last remnants of Noah's Ark. It was a real ugly thing. And Castro was sending the families. I don't know how many people were on board, but they were sleeping on the floor of this old tug. And they were going to land at Port Everglades. Of course, here, again, there's a tremendous amount of interest in it from the press and throughout the world because these were not prisoners, these were families coming out, the elderly, the lame, the disabled. And I remember very specifically a personal reaction. As you gather from everything that's been said here, there has always been a real apprehension on our part that nothing would go amiss, because the whole picture, this real picture of genuine compassion could be destroyed by one bad act. I remember, you fellows correct me if I'm wrong, we found that this ship in coming in was being given one of these here ladders on the side, you know, that is very, very hard to climb up and down on. We tried to tell the Coast Guard commander there that these were elderly people coming in and they can't maneuver that type of a ladder. And sure enough when the ship landed, the first person to get off was a real old woman and she was getting out and they had to send up a couple of real husky longshoremen to take her off that boat. I remember how we in Immigration were very much distressed at this because this was being put on television and being reported in the press, and it almost conveyed inadvertently the image that nobody cared for them, that these family people were just, "Well, here's a boat, get off," you know. So finally, we even got the Coast Guard if I remember, to put up a sign, "Bienvenidos. Welcome to America," and finally to put up a type of a platform so that these people could get out. That also had a lot of human interest in it.

FFRENCH: They actually built a platform so that we were able to get them off the ship safely. It was much better than coming down one of these ladders which were similar to a Jacob's ladder.

CULL: I'd just like to say that apart from the mechanics of this program and how it was operated, and apart from any question of which agency should get credit for its success, that I think that the successful conclusion of the program reflected credit on the United States in the eyes of the world. I think the White House

in this case was carrying out the most humane feelings on the part of the American people in this case.

SCHOENENBERGER: That's true. It really showed what the American people are. You

know, there's an awful lot to this. I think we really witnessed and were part of a small segment of American history that stands out for the attitude, as you said Dick, that America generally does have for those who are unfortunate victims of either repression or the type of thing that Castro was inflicting upon these unfortunate men. I think we all shared a great deal of pride in what we did.

FFRENCH: No doubt, no doubt. It was as smooth a flow of inspection procedures as I've ever seen. And due credit, too, must go to the Public Health Service and the Customs Service and of course to the Immigration Service, and the local medical doctors that came in from Dade County there to vaccinate and so on and so forth. It was a cooperative effort and they all should feel very proud of their action in it.

NOTO: I think sometimes that despite the fact that, you know, we recount what happened and we talk about our difficulties and our arguments and disagreements, which is only natural, that it goes to show that there's pride in what you're doing. Because if people didn't argue that way, well then there's no more pride because you just swing along. But to a large extent some of those were healthy because it surfaced feelings as to who was responsible for what. And in some instances it even compelled assuming responsibility. But it's real gratifying that when all is said and done, when the dust finally settles down, it's amazing how everything falls into place and everybody does what he's supposed to have done initially and they end up really... [Interruption]

SCHOENENBERGER: If you remember also, they said that part of this delaying tactic, they were part of this delaying tactic that Castro indulged in and caused us so much frustration. They'd move them suddenly at night from place to place and they wouldn't know where they were going. And then they even took them down through some underground caverns and showed them some forty M.I.G. [Russian aircraft named for designers Milsoyan and Gurevich] aircraft to convince them that they wouldn't be able to return or retake Cuba; they gave them a terrific indoctrination. And it was a good many days and

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possibly weeks that they were being shuttled around and living under very adverse conditions as part of—who knows why—this frustration that Castro was exerting over the whole operation. I've always suspected, and I have no proof of this, but I always suspected that part of this was an operation on the part of Castro to wheedle more dollars worth of goods out of the United States in exchange, see, and kept this thing blowing hot and cold, wouldn't you think?

NOTO: Yes.

SCHOENENBERGER: Part of a bargaining procedure.

NOTO: Do you remember the concern that we had that some of them would come out and start arguing right in our midst, while they were still, you know, within...

SCHOENENBERGER: Oh, yes. Sure.

NOTO: ...our jurisdiction. Because we thought that some of them would be bitter about this whole Cuban Bay of Pigs episode in history and possibly take out their frustrations publicly, realizing that they had an exposure in the public media, whether it was television or the press. And I think that that worried us quite a bit because it was an uncontrollable factor and it would have meant really just letting out pent-up emotions and anger and frustrations. Perhaps. I mean, I'm not passing judgment on whether they were valid or not, but we had that fear. Fortunately none of this ever happened with us. If I recall correctly there were one or two fights that did get on television, but they were on television. They took place on Dinner Key which the mayor of Miami together with a Cuban refugee committee had set up for some food and a place for reunions of families. And I remember actually seeing this on television, on a rebroadcast, that there were some fist fights and later on the story came out that what had happened was that one or two of them began to point the finger accusingly at each other and saying that: You had spied on me, or I had told Castro's people this back in Cuba. And a lot of the frictions that were between specific individuals sort of opened up and surfaced at Dinner Key. We were rather pleased, not that it happened, but that when it did happen, it didn't happen in the government processing because that would have created an image that would have hurt the President's attempt at that time.

FFRENCH: We didn't even have one incident of that, Mario, not one.

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NOTO: The only thing that we had was not even an incident; it was, one or two of them got sick, if you remember, on the food. But that was because they hadn't had good food, you know, for a long time and they were being given real good food that had been fixed dietetically by the dieticians...

OESTERLE: At the Air Force base?

NOTO: Yes. And they were given, if I recall, a roast beef dinner and of course one or two of them went into excess on it and it just upset their whole system, so they got sick. I don't even refer to that as an unpleasantry; it was just an incident. But I thank the Lord nothing ever happened from the time that they got off that plane until we delivered them safely down to Dinner Key to be reunited with their families.

SCHOENENBERGER: Do you remember President Kennedy went down to the Orange Bowl in Miami and spoke to the...

NOTO: Yes. The flags.

SCHOENENBERGER: ...to the prisoners on December 29.

NOTO: Is that when they gave him, Bob, the, if I recall, they gave him a battered flag of, what is it, Brigade 20, 25th, 26th?

SCHOENENBERGER: Bridgade 23? I forget the number.

CULL: That wouldn't have been any part of our...

SCHOENENBERGER: No, that's not part of our...

FFRENCH: No, just another incident.

NOTO: No, he just went down to the Bowl game, Dick. I remember seeing this on television.

FFRENCH: But I do remember too after this that Robert Kennedy wrote a letter for the President to all of us that had participated in this exchange, thanking us very much for, as he put it, giving up our own Christmas Eve and being away from our

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own families which he knew was sort of painful, but to consider the fact that we had done so much to make the prisoners and their families happy on this Christmas Eve. We all received a letter, which I have home and keep very close to the fireplace.

NOTO: Has anybody mentioned the fact that we did have immigration officers on board those flights?

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes. I don't think we mentioned it, but we did.

CULL: But I think you might mention, Mario, how they came out over there. Were they bothered much?

NOTO: No. Bob, more or less, had a real direct responsibility on this.

SCHOENENBERGER: No. They were not bothered much, but there's quite a few reports in here from them. I've just been scanning them as we go along here and...

NOTO: You gave one before, Bob, I remember very distinctly about the automobile race.

SCHOENENBERGER: Yes, the automobile race.

FFRENCH: Well, Mario, you had set up a procedure whereby—and I know I was part of this—each and every plane that landed at Homestead Air Force Base, the first one that I was to contact as they got off was our own immigrant inspector who had gone down on the plane and then rode back on the plane with the prisoners, just to give us an idea as to what we might expect as he got off the plane: Whether there was going to be any reaction that would be unfavorable, or did they look like a quiet crew and so on, or anything that happened on board the plane that he thought might be of some interest, also to give us the information concerning any observations that he made in Havana that would be helpful to us while the people were boarding. So we would get that report from him and we collected these for each flight...

NOTO: We were giving that C.I.A. desk.

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FFRENCH: We were turning it over to C.I.A.

CULL: And then also, he was giving us, I think, a manifest which of course was in great demand from the press there, the names of the prisoners aboard and who, their families were waiting to know whether they were here. And of course when you got that passenger list from them why...

FFRENCH: That's correct. He made the passenger list up en route from Havana, which was what, fifteen minutes roughly to the United States, so that we could turn it over to the prisoners' families.

SCHOENENBERGER: Here's a typical report from one of the if you'd like to read it into the record. Do you think that would be worth it?

OESTERLE: Sure.

SCHOENENBERGER: Here's a report from Joseph A. Hession who is the senior patrol inspector at Tampa, Florida, concerning actual observation and opinions while accompanying flights to and from Cuba: "The prisoners reported that their food for many months consisted of soup, for instance, very thin, and for instance, macaroni for lunch and dinner. When they boarded the plane, they found a Miami newspaper that one of them... [Interruption] There was an air show and tours of some underground airplane hangers where forty M.I.G.s were stored. This was an attempt to

convince them that it would be useless to try another invasion. If so, their tactics didn't work, as the prisoners almost without exception in our plane stated their desire to fight again. They expressed the hope that the United States would help a little more the next time. They said that the big obstacle was the M.I.G.s, which they must eliminate although they believed that Castro had about two hundred on the island in the three military zones. We were taken to lunch in Castro's automobile, a Buick, and passed a Russian or Czech camp, which was very shabby and looked like a rural slum in the United States, or worse. The prisoners reported they had been at the same camp and also commented on the filth." That's a typical report from one of the men in Cuba. [Interruption]

NOTO: One of our immigrant inspectors came back and said that...
[Interruption]... that didn't know what it was all about and they were trigger-happy and...

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SCHOENENBERGER: Fifteen or seventeen years old.

NOTO: ...and they were just devoted Castroites but irresponsible with no concept of real responsibility.

FFRENCH: That was Jordan [Louis Jordan].

NOTO: That's it. Jordan. You're right.

FFRENCH: Jordan. [Interruption]

NOTO: But Donovan was... [Interruption]... when the first plane came in, I think earlier about 10:45... [Interruption]... on the apron itself, he... [Interruption]... an air force plane and it was...

FFRENCH: ...reported up here, I think, to the Attorney General.

NOTO: Yeah, and went right back to Washington here to give a report either to the Attorney General or to the President. But he was gone by midnight so we didn't get much chance to talk him.

[Interruption]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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Richard W. Cull, Richard H. Ffrench, Matio T. Noto and Robert E. Schoenenberger
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